

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

March 11, 2013 | By [M. Zuhdi Jasser](#)

The following appeared in the [Georgetown Journal of International Affairs](#) on March 11, 2013.

From Somalian anarchy to Eritrean and Sudanese tyranny and civil strife, the Horn of Africa has long been a turbulent region. A notable exception has been the nation of Ethiopia.

That might be changing.

From December 15 through December 19 of last year, I was in Addis Ababa heading a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). We met with a wide range of people, from the American ambassador to Ethiopian government officials, religious leaders and nongovernmental human rights and interfaith representatives.

Prior to our trip, we had seen reports about violations against Muslims, especially since July

2011. This was when the Addis Ababa government first sought to change how Islam was practiced in Ethiopia and began to punish those resisting its new policy. Our findings confirmed the assaults on religious liberty and their negative impact—both as a human rights issue and a potential security matter.

Until July 2011, Ethiopia's government largely respected the religious freedom of its people, including Muslims, who are mostly Sufis and comprise one-third of the population. Article 27 of Ethiopia's constitution guarantees religious freedom and "the independence of the state from religion."

Four factors have fueled a shift away from honoring this right. First, in neighboring Somalia and Sudan, violent religious extremists pose a security threat. Second, within its own borders, Wahhabism—imported from Saudi Arabia—also poses a danger. Third, Ethiopia's policies have undermined civil society. Its government has imposed draconian limits on foreign funding for human rights, democracy promotion and conflict mitigation, leaving many NGOs with stark choices. They can work with the government—foregoing their independent status and drastically curtailing their activities—or they can close up shop. Consequently, there are no independent groups in Ethiopia that can monitor religious freedom or undertake interfaith cooperation or intra-faith conflict resolution activities. Finally, Ethiopia's government is perpetrating religious repression, purportedly in response to Wahhabist threats.

Starting in July 2011, Ethiopia's government decided that the way to fight the Wahhabism of some Muslims was by limiting the freedom of all Muslims. It imported imams from Lebanon representing the al-Ahbash movement within Islam and compelled Ethiopia's imams and Islamic educators to embrace and mirror their teachings. The government began dismissing dissenters by firing imams and closing their schools. This effort was conducted not only through Ethiopia's government but also through the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC).

When it was launched, EIASC's members had been appointed by the government rather than elected by the community, thus depriving Muslims of a recognized, independent voice. By December, the attempts to impose al-Ahbash triggered protests outside of mosques.

In the spring of 2012, an Arbitration Committee of 17 Islamic scholars was created by the protesters to negotiate with the government about respecting religious freedom guarantees such as ending the imposition of al-Ahbash, reopening schools and restoring dismissed imams and administrators. The Committee also asked for new EIASC elections.

By the end of July, negotiations had failed, protests increased and the government began conducting house-to-house searches. The government arrested 1,000 protestors, along with all 17 Committee members, eight of whom it later released.

In October, the government charged 29 protestors, including the nine Committee members it was still holding, with terrorism and attempting to establish an Islamic state. Thus far, it has offered no evidence that these people are terrorists.

We met with attorneys for 28 of the 29 who reported that their clients were tortured and that they've had trouble meeting with those imprisoned. The government prevented us from meeting with any of the prisoners directly.

Meanwhile, officials denied any role in the al-Ahbash trainings, rejected our concerns about foisting a particular belief onto a religious community, insisted that they do not meddle in religious affairs unless "red lines" are crossed—a which term they neglected to define—and blamed the EIASC alone for the al-Ahbash trainings, even though EIASC members were initially government appointees and remain entirely sympathetic to the government.

In our meeting with newly elected EIASC members, they reiterated the government's talking points supporting separation of religion and state while labeling the demonstrators "terrorists," even though some of its members had joined in protesting. Members kept deferring to the Council's vice president, whom we learned is close to Ethiopia's ruling party. We also learned that the Council's president previously served in senior governmental postings. Finally, the EIASC members ominously said there would be no divisions within Ethiopia's Muslim community and that dissenters would be "brought into the fold."

What does this all mean?

While Ethiopia's government fears violent religious extremism from Somalia and Sudan and the influence of Wahhabism, the way to counter religious extremism is not with religious repression but through religious freedom. It is not by manipulating outcomes in the marketplace of ideas, but supporting a marketplace that encompasses all ideas, including religious ideas. It is by trusting in the common sense of its people, believing that most will reject not just government repression but religious extremism and the totalitarian control it seeks over them and their families.

Indeed, across the world, study after study affirms that where there is religious freedom, there is stability, harmony and prosperity, and where religious liberty is lacking, so are these blessings.

Thus, the only way the radicals can win is if governments, in the name of fighting these extremists, repeatedly abuse their people's freedom.

In Ethiopia, as elsewhere, freedom, not just for the sake of human rights but for peace and security as well, is the antidote to extremism.

M. Zuhdi Jasser serves as a Commissioner at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, please contact Samantha Schnitzer at (202) 786-0613 or sschnitzer@uscirf.gov.